
Title of Object

Coffer with print of "The Annunciation"

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Master of the Tres Petites Heures d'Anne de Bretagne (Master of the Very Small Hours of Anne of Brittany)

Date of Object: c. 1490-1500

Accession Number: 2016.14

Material/Medium: Woodcut in black, hand colored with brush, stencil, and watercolor on laid paper, wood, iron, leather

Department: Prints and Drawings

Culture: French

Country: France

File Created: 8/17/2016

Author of File: William Wilson

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Last Updated/Reviewed: 8/23/2016

Tour Topics

Birds, architecture, daily life, spirituality/sacred, stories/storytelling, women, writing/calligraphy, Mary, Gabriel, Latin hymn, travel bag

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

- 1) There is a small book inside the coffer. What do you see on its cover?
- 2) There is a print on the inside of the lid. Describe the details of the print.
- 3) The object is described as a safety or messenger box. Similar coffers of the same period have been shown in art to contain personal items such as we might today carry in a toiletry bag. Compare what you pack in your toiletry bag or a small travel bag. Do you think it would fit in this 15th Century coffer?
- 4) With what appears to be a small devotional book and the religious print on the inside of the lid, compare this combination personal effects container and religious devotional guide with modern travel packing habits.

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

- 1) The coffer is constructed on wood, iron, and leather which made it strong enough to withstand the conditions of travel.
- 2) The religious print on the inside of the lid was created separately from the coffer and then pasted inside the lid. It was pasted inside the lid at a slightly angle.

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

- 1) The coffer was both practical and religious. It most likely contained items used for personal care while traveling. It also contained a prayer book and a print to aid in personal devotions.
- 2) Because the coffer would have been carried close to a traveling individual, we can assume the art on the lid was intended for private viewing, though its content would have been understood by a large number of people in the culture.
- 3) The coffer is constructed solidly with wood and iron, and has a substantial latch on the front. Yet, there is a secret or hidden small compartment under the devotional book. This second compartment would have been a place to keep treasured or valuable items out of sight of a personal attendant or other traveling companions.
- 4) The subject on the print is of The Annunciation – the angel Gabriel telling Mary that she would be the mother of a child whose name would be Jesus. The word banner from the angel toward Mary reads, “Ave gracia plena domut” which would be the “Ave Maria” with the word “Maria” omitted because it would have been understood; “dominus” becomes shortened to “domu” and the “t” from “tecum” is added to the end. All this ... because people who could read would have already known the Ave Maria and the banner-talk saves space.
- 5) The larger text at the bottom of the print are verses 4 and 5 out of 7 of “Ave Maris Stella”, a Latin chant of the Christian tradition from the 8th Century that became popular in medieval Europe. The 2 verses in the lid are:

Monstra te esse matrem:
sumat per te preces,
qui pro nobis natus,
tulit esse tuus.

Virgo singularis,
inter omnes mites,
nos culpīs solutos,
mites fac et castos.

Note that the next-to-last word, “et” (and) in Latin is abbreviated with a sign (+) and the last word is indicated with only a letter “c”.

The complete text is:

AVE maris stella,
Dei Mater alma,
atque semper Virgo,
felix caeli porta.

Sumens illud Ave
Gabrielis ore,
funda nos in pace,
mutans Hevae nomen.

Solve vincula reis,
profer lumen caecis
mala nostra pelle,
bona cuncta posce.

Monstra te esse matrem:
sumat per te preces,
qui pro nobis natus,
tulit esse tuus.

Virgo singularis,
inter omnes mites,
nos culpis solutos,
mites fac et castos.

Vitam praesta puram,
iter para tutum:
ut videntes Iesum
semper collaetemur.

Sit laus Deo Patri,
summo Christo decus,
Spiritus Sancto,
tribus honor unus. Amen.

HAIL, O Star of the ocean,
God's own Mother blest,
ever sinless Virgin,
gate of heav'nly rest.

Taking that sweet Ave,
which from Gabriel came,
peace confirm within us,
changing Eve's name.

Break the sinners' fetters,
make our blindness day,
Chase all evils from us,
for all blessings pray.

Show thyself a Mother,
may the Word divine
born for us thine Infant
hear our prayers through thine.

Virgin all excelling,
mildest of the mild,
free from guilt preserve us
meek and undefiled.

Keep our life all spotless,
make our way secure
till we find in Jesus,
joy for evermore.

Praise to God the Father,
honor to the Son,
in the Holy Spirit,
be the glory one. Amen.

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

This rare Gothic French coffer or traveling box sheds light on an important early use of prints from the dawn of printmaking. A hand-colored 15th-century woodcut representing The Annunciation is pasted inside the cover of the large interior compartment. This attractive wooden box, covered with leather and reinforced with iron fittings, was carried as a backpack or traveling case. (Such boxes are also called messenger boxes or safety boxes). The coffer has two compartments, one large one (decorated with the print), and a second, smaller “secret” compartment thought to be used to carry relics, religious objects, traveling papers, or valuables. While the precise contents of these traveling cases are not known, the function of the woodcut is clear. It served a devotional purpose, providing a small altar to its owner on his or her travels. Just over 100 such boxes survive, all dating between 1480 and 1510, all French, all likely produced in Paris.

The present woodcut has been attributed to the Master of the Très Petites Heures d'Anne de Bretagne (Master of the Very Small Hours of Anne of Brittany), also called the Master of the Apocalypse Rose of Sainte-Chapelle, and the Master of the Unicorn Hunt. This French artist designed tapestries, stained glass, illuminations and woodcuts, and ran a flourishing workshop in Paris in this period.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

1) For information on medieval coffers and the color prints, check out this article:

<http://artinprint.org/article/coloring-within-the-lines-the-use-of-stencil-in-early-woodcuts/>

2) Since the lid is small and difficult to see, there are printed copies of the text of the lid in Mia's object file. Someone especially interested in medieval hymns or Latin script might find this interesting.

3) Especially if showing the coffer to children, it might be interesting to have a small toiletry bag with you to show a modern-day version of this French traveling coffer.

4) This is a PDF from an auction house that developed a traveling exhibition of these coffers, with a good example of the Annunciation print on page 5:

<http://www.lesenluminures.com/enlu-assets/exhibitions/real/2015-10-coffret/gothic-traveling-coffers-revisited.pdf>

5) Here is an example of another such coffer in the Art Institute of Chicago's collection:

<http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/193362>

Source for the text of the hymn:

Ave Maris Stella - a popular hymn to the Virgin in the Middle Ages.

If you want to know a little more about it: www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/BVM/AveMarisStella.html
or https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ave_Maris_Stella.

Friends who know Latin helped translate the banner on the print.